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ABSTRACT

Shared governance is an elusive concept for schools to grasp and put into action. For schools to move forward with shared governance implementation, they need to gain a clear, precise understanding of who is involved, what processes ensure that those targeted will actually be involved, what those individuals' efforts should focus on, and what methods are used to inform the faculty of the results of their efforts in decision making. School staffs need a clear, fully operational process governing their efforts so that everyone in the school understands and follows the appropriate procedures for their collective actions. Every group that is involved in shared governance should understand whether its role is to advise or to actually make decisions. Group members can be appointed, elected, or asked to volunteer. The more people that are involved in the governance process, the higher the degree of faculty support. Figure 1 shows the different conditions of understanding in the shared governance process. Figure 2 shows the educational impacts of the different focuses of shared governance. (EJS)

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Implementing Shared Governance: Models for Empowering Teachers

AERA Presentation, Chicago 1991

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Introduction

After talking to a PTA about the Program For School Improvement's collaboration with schools interested in shared governance, we were approached by a teacher who said, "I know my principal is going to tell you that she has been doing shared governance for years and I want you to know it's not true. She runs our school with an iron fist!" A few minutes later, the principal she had eluded to, after excitedly praising our efforts, said, "I am so pleased to hear that shared governance is gaining popularity because I have been using it for years and think it's wonderful!

When teachers in a school that had been using shared governance for several years were asked about the decision-making process in their school, some indicated the school was a democratic place where everyone had an opportunity to contribute to schoolwide decisions, others indicated they didn't know how decisions were made in this school, some cited a staff development committee as the major decision-making body, and still others stated that the principal made most of the decisions in the school.

In March of 1990, twenty-four Georgia elementary, middle, and high schools joined with the University of Georgia's Program For School Improvement (PSI) to form the League of Professional Schools. All the schools in the League made a formal commitment to implement shared governance. They had access to (1) an information retrieval system of successful instructional programs

and shared governance research, (2) a newsletter containing information about what other schools in the League are doing and articles about shared governance, (3) regularly scheduled workshops and meetings, (4) an annual conference, (5) a support network of schools working on similar goals, (6) evaluation, research and instrumentation consultation services by telephone, and (7) an on-site visit. One year later, approximately one-half of the schools reported that, despite good faith efforts, they still had more questions about shared governance than answers.

As these examples illustrate, shared governance is an elusive concept to grasp and put into action. There are many pitfalls waiting for schools trying to implement shared governance. The PSI staff and staff members of League schools feel we are beginning to understand, not how to avoid these pitfalls completely, but how to anticipate, define, and deal with them.

When we first began our collaboration, in an effort not to be prescriptive, PSI painted a picture of shared governance using very broad strokes. PSI staff urged each League school to each create a democratic process that fit its unique situation. This process should enable staff to collaboratively focus on curricular and instructional issues, while following an action research model of assessment in order to be accountable for their actions. It was suggested they think through the use of direct referendum governance as well as representative governance, and develop a process that allowed teachers to have equal rights and

responsibilities with their principal in making schoolwide decisions. It was stressed that the process should not give any individual ultimate authority or veto power over areas targeted for shared governance.

Initially, neither the PSI staff, nor staff's from schools struggling with their implementation, realized the importance of each school gaining an explicit, shared vision of what exactly it intended to do with shared governance. Schools were not implementing shared governance into a vacuum. Each school already had formal and informal power structures in place which guided, either explicitly or implicitly, how business was to be conducted. Some made decisions/recommendations through a departmental structure, others through a grade level structure. Some had schoolwide advisory boards. In swcweal schools, teachers were already making decisions about the life of the school. Problems and confusion arouse when the shared governance process was simply added on to this existing structure with no clarification as to what existing procedures, if any, it was to replace. In effect, some schools ended up with several governance policies operating simultaneously and the shared governance initiative was seen as just another thing that some of the staff was doing, rather than a new governance structure that was going to make a fundamental change in the way some schoolwide initiatives were generated and implemented.

When we grasped what was happening, we (PSI staff and school staffs) came to understand that for some schools to move forward

with implementation they needed to gain a clear, precise, understanding of (1) who exactly will be involved in the shared governance initiative, (2) what process will be put in place to ensure that those targeted will actually be involved, (3) what will be the focus of these individuals' efforts, and (4) what methods will be used to inform the faculty of the results of their efforts. A lack of specificity in one or all of these areas was diffusing some schools' efforts and, in others, paralyzing them from taking any collective action.

When the following observations and continua were presented to school teams, the response was immediate and dramatic. What had been a nebulous concept for many came into focus. By studying the specific parts that make up a shared governance model we all gained a deeper understanding of shared governance and its elusive nature. When team members began to communicate more precisely about their problems and questions, they found answers were easier to develop and pursue.

The Players

Staffs began to ask themselves if it was their intent to involve all the teachers in the school, or only a select group? Will students, parents, support staff, central office staff, or outside consultants be included? The principal's degree of involvement was clearly defined. Everyone involved with the school understood what implications, if any, this change of governance had for them.

The Process

A shared governance process that creates and monitors its intended conditions of governance can save a school untold problems. We identified key conditions created by the various governance processes used by each League school. We then listed these conditions according to their apparent ability to facilitate shared governance. [INSERT FIGURE 1] To analyze and further clarify these conditions we condensed them into five continua: unclear to clear, non-operational to operational, advisory to decision-making, appointed representative to democratically elected/volunteer representatives, and low degree of involvement to high degree of involvement. It was unusual for conditions to be either completely present or completely absent, they usually fell somewhere in-between--hence a continuum rather than a simple present/not present format was used. It was apparent that these conditions overlapped and interacted with each other; problems in one could, and usually did, affect some or all of the other conditions.

UNCLEAR----------CLEAR

School staffs need a clear process governing their efforts so that everyone in the school (or at least a vast majority) understands what procedures are appropriate for their collective actions. Schools whose process wasn't clearly disseminated had people who were confused and in some cases angry. For example, staff members in an elementary schools were not sure if they were

to reach decisions by a simple, majority vote; two-thirds majority vote; or, if they were to reach consensus. When rules were established as problems arose, some people felt misused. The steps that are to be followed for decision-making need to be carefully thought out and articulated up front for all to understand. Unclear processes create confusion that fragments people's actions and undermines the implementation of shared governance. Clear processes empower people by giving them all an equal understanding of how business is to be conducted.

NON-OPERATIONAL----------OPERATIONAL

Some of the schools created a thoughtful, clear process but failed to operationalize all or parts of it. Schools were obviously not able to profit from a process that nobody followed. Schools found it was not enough to simply write and articulate a process. The process needed to be monitored to make sure that the agreed upon procedures were being followed. Generally, people who were not following the process were not acting out of malice; they either forgot it, never knew it, or thought they had a better way of doing it. Schools that allowed people to stray from the agreed upon process encountered the same problems of schools that had unclear processes--confusion and fragmented action.

ADVISORY----------DECISION-MAKING

Every group should understand if they are a decision-making

group or an advisory group. It is demoralizing for groups to think they are to make a decision only to have their decision vetoed. It needs to be made clear who actually will make the final decision on each issue. The most common problem with this occurred between principals and teachers. However, it can occur in other ways. For example, a high school schoolwide leadership council appointed a task force to research and lead a peer coaching initiative, the council however failed to make it clear if the task force had decision-making responsibilities, or if the task force was to bring recommendations to the council for the final decision.

APPOINTED REPS----------DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED/VOLUNTEER REPS

Schools that used department chairs or grade level team leaders as their shared governance executive committee often had problems because the leadership positions were filled by appointees rather than democratically elected representatives or volunteers. Decisions made by a group of teachers appointed by the principal were perceived in some schools as top down decisions. If everyone doesn't have equal access to the governance structure, there may be charges of favoritism or "stacking the deck." Even when the executive committee was elected there were still areas where this issue needed to be dealt with. For example, leadership teams can either appoint task forces or ask for volunteers. Volunteers task forces give everyone the opportunity to participate as much or as little as

they wish. Schools found the more accessible the process was to all teachers the more positive the feelings of the staff for the process.

LOW DEGREE OF INVOLVEMENT----------HIGH DEGREE OF INVOLVEMENT

Schools found the more people involved in the governance process, the higher the degree of faculty support and the fewer instances of people misunderstanding the intent of the process. The degree of involvement varied from school to school. One school had over 75% of its faculty involved in making decisions about schoolwide changes. Other schools had a low percentage of its faculty directly involved. The degree of involvement usually was closely tied to the other conditions. If the other conditions were typically on the right half of the continuum, then the degree of involvement was likely to be found on the right half as well.

At a recent League of Professional Schools meeting, school teams discussed and then placed their school on each of these five continua. They found this exercise helped them establish a common language about their shared governance initiative, identify problem areas, and examine their process in light of their intent.

These process characteristics are found in various stages and combinations throughout all the League schools creating a myriad of varying conditions of governance. This already complex picture was further complicated when we looked at the issues

schools were focusing on through their shared governance process.

The Focus

When we began our collaboration with schools we emphasized the importance of focusing on curricular and instructional issues. We thought encouraging schools to keep their sights on issues that dealt directly with curriculum and instruction was sufficient focus to help them with their efforts. It wasn't. Staffs had a vague sense that they should focus on everything at once and were overwhelmed by the complexity of the task. They didn't know where to begin. Addressing these issues was further complicated by the fact that schools were addressing these problems of focus while dealing with a new governance process replete with its own set of problems mentioned earlier.

It was not our intent to advocate that schools address all curricular and instructional issues at once. Again, we failed to understand the complexities of shared governance and the utility of breaking issues down into smaller parts in order to understand the bigger picture. Most schools can't immediately make all curriculum and instruction decisions collectively. We began to encourage schools who were having problems defining their focus to pick an issue or issues that they felt they could reasonably address. We suggested they might want to start with a single issue and slowly build on the number and complexity of issues. Some might choose to keep a narrow focus indefinitely. The point was, schools should limit their focus to issues that fit the school's ability and or readiness.

To facilitate this idea, we compiled a list of issues that schools were currently addressing. We then placed these issues on a continuum according to our perception as to their potential impact on the education of students. [INSERT FIGURE 2]

Schools found this visual representation helpful in studying the potential impact of their focus of their governance process. As with the process continuum detailed earlier, this continuum helped schools examine what they were currently doing and what they wanted to do in the future. It gave them a way to talk about the focus of their work and to make decisions about next steps.

Teachers and principals reported that issues we have placed under the 0-impact column can have a dramatic influence on teachers' lives. These 0-impact issues are often times very emotional, energy draining issues. Schools found it was easy to get bogged down with these issues and lose sight of the larger issue of making their school a better place for students to learn. A few staff members, when first presented with this continuum expressed surprise that their focus was all on 0-impact issues. They then began to discuss if this was what they intended their focus to be.

Other schools focused their efforts directly on core issues. They were able to do this by reaching an agreement among themselves to not address maintenance issues, or in some cases, by appointing a task force whose sole mission was to deal with 0-impact issues. This got the issues addressed and didn't

interfere with the core impact issues.

No League schools' focused strictly on issues listed as having comprehensive educational impact. PSI is not suggesting that schools strive to address comprehensive impact issues. The comprehensive label is descriptive of the overall impact these issues have on the life of the school and should not be understood to be of greater importance or have a greater impact on teaching and learning than do the issues listed under the core impact column.

Summary

There are many potential pitfalls involved in shared governance. Administrators and teachers are not accustomed to this type of governance and it is hard for them to function in new, often unprecedented roles in their schools, and easy to fall back into traditional, familiar roles.

It comes down to the ability to clarify the issues to be resolved so that questions can reach such a level of precision that they beg for clear and realistic answers. School staffs that are able to communicated openly, despite all the complexities and problems involved with shared governance, are well on their way to establishing a professional culture that will benefit students. By the same token, if PSI can continue to listen and learn from these professionals, and to feed back what we learn collectively for schools to apply individually, we will be well on our way to becoming effective facilitators of shared governance.

Conditions of Governance: Process

Non-League	League	
Low	*Moderate*	*High*
• Unclear	• Democratic Procedures Clear *Process is New*	• Democratic Procedures Understood by All and Institutionalized
• Advisory	• Groups Make Decisions for Everyone Else	• Elected Body or Volunteers at Large Set Priorities, Make Decisions, and Assess Results Through Schoolwide Process
• Policy in Place- *Not Operational*	• Elected Representatives or Volunteers at Large	
• Representatives Appointed		

Figure 1

Focus of Governance: Educational Impact

Non-League	League		
0-Impact	*Minimal Impact*	*Core Impact*	*Comprehensive Impact*
• Parking Spaces	• Textbook Adoption	• Curriculum	• School Budget
• Lunchroom Supervision	• Parent Programs	• Staff Development	• Hiring of Personnel
• Faculty Lounge	• Inservice Days	• Supervision	• Deployment of Personnel
• Sunshine Fund	• Small Budgets	• Instructional Programs	• Personnel Evaluation
• Adult Recreation	• Discipline Policy	• Student Assessment	
• Bus Duties		• Action Research	
• Refreshments		• Program Evaluation	
		• Instructional Budget	

Figure 2

1991 PSI League of Professional Schools